

Readers' Perception of Nigerian Newspapers on the Internet

OLLEY, Oritsesan Wilfred (Corresponding author)

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Communication Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo - Nigeria

CHILE, Solomon Terungwa

Department of Communication Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria

Abstract

This study is an assessment of the state of Nigerian newspapers published on the internet. The study looks at the state of awareness and utility in readership and response to feedback services of online newspapers among readers. Also assessed are the challenges and prospects of internet newspaper publishing in Nigeria. The methodology for this study is the survey. The respondents for the study were purposively sampled from the population of newspaper readers (both online and conventional) in some selected cities in South-South Nigeria. Findings revealed that, the internet has played a significant role in the transformation of the newspaper industry in Nigeria and that the high rate of internet charges and low services experienced by internet subscribers is a drawback to Nigerian online Newspaper readership. The paper concludes that in spite of the benefits of the internet, many Nigerians still do not fancy the reading of Newspapers online because they believe that any faceless individual can post whatever he likes on the internet for public consumption.

Keywords: Audience, Perception, Internet, Newspaper, Information Technology

Introduction

The Internet continues to evolve into a major news source. The internet which is the worldwide system of interconnected computers makes use of telecommunication resources. It is defined by Aina (2003), Hanson (2005) as a network made up of large number of computers throughout the whole world. The computers in the network communicate and share data with one another. The internet with all its capabilities have changed the way we live, learn and work. It permits us to communicate more with people around the world, regardless of location and distance, thus making it a global village.

Anyone who has followed the Internet industry over the last decade might have seen an amazing series of events. The transformation brought about by the internet in the area of the mass media is enormous. One of those areas is the newspaper industry. The internet has completely changed the face of the printing industry and newspapers have taken the lead. Today, people do not have to wait for 24 hours for newspapers to update them of happenings around the world as newspapers now have 'breaking news' which was an exclusive of the broadcast industry. People do not have to wait until the vendor(s) deliver the newsprint before knowing what is happening in the dailies.

On a typical day, more than 50 million Americans obtain news from the Web (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006). The Newspaper Association of American (NAA, 2006) reports that 112 million people visited online news sites during the first quarter of 2006. Nearly one-quarter (24%) of Americans say the Internet is their main source of news, while 44% obtain news from online sources at least once a week (Pew Research Center, 2005). This no doubt signifies a tremendous change and transformation in the newspaper readership by the internet courtesy of computers interconnectivity.

In spite of the seeming successes of the internet as a news medium, questions have been raised about the credibility of online news (Lasica, 1998 and Online News Association, 2002). These concerns are significant in that journalism is built on the principles of credibility. The public is likely not to pay attention to a medium that they do not trust because trust is a factor in news reporting. Johnson and Kaye (1998) cautions that lack of trust in information obtained from the Internet could keep it from becoming an even more important and influential news source.

In what seem to be a global diffusion of innovation and social change, the newspaper industry in Nigeria has also joined the world trend of publishing daily newspapers on the internet. There is no gainsaying the fact that majority of Nigerian newspapers are on the internet presently. The issue which many online newspaper readers have had to grapple with is that of the credibility of the news sources and the identification of the reporters or authors of the internet stories. The internet has not only come to revolutionize the dissemination of information by the mass media but also seriously altered the traditional processes of news gathering and processing. Nigerian newspapers may have gone to the internet partly as a means of reaching out to the outside world and partly as a way of not being left out of the information advantages which the internet has brought to the print industry globally and most importantly as a result of the threats from the broadcast industry.

According to Baran (2004, p.121)

Television forced the newspaper to change the way they did business and served

their readers, now online computer networks pose the greatest challenge to this medium. Online job hunting and auto sales services are already cutting into the classified advertising profit of newspapers.

The entire world is fast embracing information and communication technologies in all spheres of life and the newspaper industry cannot be left out. The changing face of the newspaper industry could not have been what we have today if not for the convergence between the newspaper and the modern technologies adopted in the industry. On the issue of convergence, Baran (2004) notes that technology has led to newspapers all over the world reinventing themselves and becoming more user-friendly, more casual, more lifestyle-oriented, and more in touch with youths.

Statement of the Problem

The internet can be judged as the greatest communication inventions of man in modern times. This is mostly as a result of the convergence power which it has, and which has also been used to bring other traditional media to a common plane. In Nigeria, the face of the newspapers can be said to be changing greatly. The Nigerian newspapers can now be read on the internet just like *the London Times*, *New York Times*, *Le Monde of France* and others.

In spite of the obvious benefits which the internet has brought the print industry, many people still do not fancy the reading of newspapers online as a result of their biased notion of the internet as a place where any faceless individual can post whatever he likes for public consumption. To this school of thought, the newspaper hard copy is the only authentic news source. It is obvious from the foregoing that, there is a perceived problem about credibility of news stories or information on the internet from Nigerian online newspapers. Oyero, (2007) asserts that because there is no gate keeping mechanism that allows for editing, verifying facts and establishing accuracy before web information is posted trusting stories online becomes difficult. This study therefore examines how Nigerian print and online daily newspaper readers perceive Nigerian newspapers on the internet, in terms of credibility of the online stories. In other words, how do the audience see Nigerian newspapers online and what do they think about them being able to stand as recognised news sites like their foreign counterparts?

Research Questions

As a guide, the following research questions were formulated.

- RQ1. Are Nigerian online newspapers of the same standard with their Western counterparts?
- RQ2. To what extent are Nigerians exposed to online newspaper publications.
- RQ3. How does Nigerian perceive Nigerian newspapers online?
- RQ4. What are the problems encountered by Readers (audience) of Nigerian newspapers online?

Conceptual Discussion and Theoretical Consideration/Justification:

The Internet as Modern Newspaper hub

A growing literature in economics seeks to document the extent to which electronic sources substitute for traditional products. More recently, the relationship between print and on-line newspaper and magazine sales has been studied (Filistrucci 2005). In spite growing evidence that the internet has drawn consumers from traditional media, much seems not to be done in the area of determining how traditional media audience has changed due to the influence from the internet. There is no gainsaying the fact that changes in market composition are particularly important for media products but research has shown that, unlike traditional product markets, the number and types of products available depends on the distribution of consumer tastes (Lisa, 2006). The tendency for consumers to affect each other through product markets has been documented in radio, newspaper and television.

In the context of the internet, if groups with particular tastes are more likely than others to connect, these groups might also be more likely to jettison traditional media in favour of electronic sources. For example, if younger individuals with a college degree are more likely to have ready access to the internet, they might also be more likely to shift consumption to internet news. Individuals who switch are better off, but the effect on consumers who do not switch is uncertain. All else equal, the presence of fixed costs would suggest that a smaller audience for traditional media would mean fewer products with less variety, making remaining consumers worse off. But traditional media sources would be expected to reposition themselves in response to internet penetration, altering content to better suit the new distribution of types. An example might be reducing coverage of topics that appeal to a younger urban audience such as live entertainment and adding content appealing to older suburbanites, perhaps education. Changes might also take the form of shifting coverage toward topics less adaptable to the internet, for example newspapers shifting away from breaking news stories to in-depth analysis.

The Internet and Its Threats to Traditional Media – Print Newspapers

The internet has turned out to be the greatest challenge faced by the newspaper. This is obvious as the internet has proven to be most damaging in its attack on newspapers especially in the areas of classified advertising business. There was a time in history when classified adverts were the exclusive of the newspapers the marriage of newspapers and the internet is yet to translate into financial success for the older medium. Although there are emerging signs and the profits will only come when the newspaper owners are through with their present drive of building online readers. This is true as it also took the older medium time before it gained grounds.

According to Baran (2009, p.120), digital delivery of newspapers can now be viewed on home screens, laptops, handheld devices such as palmtop and mobile phones. A study by Pew Institute (2008) show that internet has overtaken all other news medium amongst the young people in the United States of America. Many young Americans sampled in the study indicated that the internet is their main news source. The table below was gotten from the research.

Internet Rivals TV as Main News Source for Young People*				
Main source of news	Aug 2006	Sept 2007	Dec 2008	07-08 Change
Television	62	68	59	-11
Internet	32	34	59	+25
Newspapers	29	23	28	+5
Radio	16	13	18	+5
Magazines	1	*	4	+4
Other (Vol.)	3	5	6	+1

* Ages 18 to 29.
Figures add to more than 100% because multiple responses were allowed.

Source: Pew Institute (2008)

In the same study, it was also found that most of the respondents rely mainly on the internet as their source for international news. The table below also explains.



Source: Pew Institute (2008)

Regarding the credibility of online information, research has generally found that the public rates online news similarly to other media. Johnson and Kaye (1998) surveyed politically-interested Internet users to examine whether they viewed Internet publications to be as credible as their traditionally delivered counterparts. They found that online newspapers, news magazines, and politically-oriented websites were judged at least somewhat credible by more than two-thirds of respondents. Moreover, online newspapers and online candidate literature were judged as significantly more credible than their traditional counterparts.

The Online News Association (2002) surveyed a nationwide panel of American Internet users and reported that online news was rated about as credible as that of traditional media sources. For example, 78% said that cable television websites were credible. National newspaper and local newspaper websites were rated as credible by 67% and 63% of respondents, respectively. However, 13% of American Internet users felt that online news was their most trusted news source.

Those seeking news regarding national issues were much more likely to visit the websites of major news organizations than Web-only publications and political sites (Pew Research Center, 2000a). In a survey by the Center for the Digital Future, (2005), almost 79% of American Internet users indicated that most or all of the information posted on established news sites, such as nytimes.com, is accurate.

Cross comparison of media credibility has been a recurring research theme for mass communication

scholars and journalists, particularly since Roper polls in the early 1960s showed that audiences evaluated television as a more credible channel for news than newspapers (Gaziano, 1988).

The question arising here is, has the Internet become a credible channel capable of substituting traditional news media like the newspaper? The credibility of the Internet in general as a news medium has been a popular issue in research in recent times. One of such issue is that the internet lacks editorial and gatekeeping rules and this makes information online to be vulnerable. Certainly, there is an iota of merit to this accusation for general information available on the Internet, but not for most branded news organizations' websites.

In an experimental study, Ognianova (1998) found that news sites associated with a newspaper or television network were perceived as more credible than those sites not associated with such an organization. Respondents in another study rated the online sites of major news organizations higher in believability than Web-only sites (Pew Research Center, 2000b).

The Online News Association (2002) reports that 69% of journalists believe online news sites did not meet the same standards as more traditional sources. Journalists also tended to rate online news sites lower in credibility than did the public (Lasica, 2002). The most commonly expressed concern is related to the high speed with which stories can be posted online. The competition to be the first to report breaking news stories is, according to Lasica (2002), heightened by the Internet and makes errors more common. The majority of journalists surveyed in a Pew Research Center (2004) study said that the Internet has increased the amount of incorrect information in new stories.

Bruce Garrison of School of Communication University of Miami in a study of leading problems encountered by daily newspaper journalists in using the World Wide Web for news gathering in America, the respondents to 1997 and 1998 national censuses listed their perceptions of flaws in the Web as a newsgathering source. A total of 226 newspapers in 1997 and 185 in 1998, with a daily circulation of 20,000 or greater each year, participated in the study. Data from similar national censuses conducted in 1994, 1995, and 1996 are also reported for some variables.

Deuze (2001) believes that technological factors challenge traditional journalistic ways of storytelling. Little wonder, Arant and Anderson (2001) in a study reported that nearly half of online editors reported that less time was spent verifying information before a story was posted. The majority of respondents in a Pew Research Center (2004) study said that the Internet has improved journalism, with many citing its benefit as a research tool. Additionally, a majority gave the websites of major news organizations high grades (A or B).

Kaye & Medoff, (1999) reports that the Internet has become an asset to many journalists who have embraced it. This is evident in the growing numbers of journalists use the World Wide Web as a reporting tool with considerable interest. Among the most appealing reasons for use of this new resource is its scope and depth of information as well as the speed at which the information may be retrieved.

Semonche (1993) reports that:

before personal computers and fax machines, journalists relied on other tools to do their jobs: telephones, telegraphs and typewriters were at the top of the list... Add a modem to a computer with a news library researcher skilled in online database searching, and reporters discover information resources unrivalled in scope. With expanded access into electronic files of government data, and by analysing that data, reporters really become power journalists," (p.267).

Journalists use online resources for background for interviews or other purposes, to find or identify sources, to check or verify facts, to read their competition, to become informed about current events, and to identify story ideas (Garrison, 1998; Ward & Hansen, 1997).

Theoretical Justification

This study is anchored on the perception theory. According to Folarin (2005), perception depends on a complex of variables such as psychological disposition, past experiences, cultural expectations and social relationships. All these result in the selective process, which takes place in a 'stop gate' fashion with selective exposure, selective attention, and selective retention. In selective exposure, it means that Nigerian audience has to be exposed to the Nigerian newspapers online before they can attend to it. It is also believed that people seek out information that caters for their own interest, while avoiding those that attack their self-image. This determines which papers they subscribe to or read at all.

In the selective attention, the eye is known to process information much faster than the brain can interpret. The human brain has to select which information to pay attention to in order to avoid confusion. In the case of the online readers, the attention he pays to the news items on the web depends on the relevance of that message to his predispositions. In order words, an individual surfing the net will pay close attention to a new headline that can satisfy his information search.

In selective perception, each of the readers tends to perceive and then decode communication messages in the light of our previous experiences and current dispositions and needs. The language we speak and words we

use also tend to circumscribe our perception. The type of headline display will influence an individual perception of the item.

In selective retention, only that news item that satisfies an individual's curiosity and which make meaning to the reader can be retained, that is, online readers can remember certain information that agrees with their needs.

Methodology

The survey research method was adopted for this study. Survey method usually allows for the collection of a large data from a sizeable population in a highly economical way (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003, p.92). The population for the study consisted of all newspaper readers in selected cities in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria, and they cut across all income earners, students, pensioners, and the unemployed, regardless of sex, religion, status and tribe. The choice of the zone became necessary and suitable for this study based on the available and high population of newspaper publishers originating from the zone. More so, the availability and high concentration of internet cafes and hot spots in the selected cities, triggering high population of online newspaper readers also informed choice of the zone.

Respondents for the study were selected through the stratified random sampling technique. From the various categories of newspaper readers earlier stated, the researchers used the income earners and students within the age brackets of 18-65 years of both sexes (bivariate) who reside in Warri, Benin City, Port-Harcourt, Uyo, Yenagoa, and Calabar. By reason of the relevance and importance, the researchers divided the population of the study into two relevant and significant strata based on their status. A random sample was then drawn from each of the strata, that is, the respondents (income earners and students) from some institutions and establishments in the cities. The selected respondents included two hundred income earners who were selected randomly from some government and private offices and another one hundred respondents who were students drawn from higher institutions in the selected cities. The researchers employed the questionnaire instrument of research and administered on 300 subjects comprising income earners and residents in Warri, Benin City, Port-Harcourt, Uyo, Yenagoa and Calabar respectively. This yielded data as presented in the following tables.

Analysis of Data Collected

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents' accessibility to the Internet

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Often	187	62
Not often	113	38
Not at all	-	-
Total	300	100

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents' readership of online Newspapers

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	236	79
No	64	21
Total	300	100

Table 3: Frequency of Respondents' readership of Online Newspapers

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	133	44
Weekly	47	16
Rarely	56	19
Never	64	21
Total	300	100

Table 4: Respondents perception on whether Online Newspapers differ from Hard copies

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	83	28
No	151	50
Don't Know	66	22
Total	300	100

Table 5: Motivating Factors to respondents' readership of online newspapers

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Always available	49	16
Timely update	37	12
Incorporation of breaking news	12	4
Less Expensive	41	14
Ability to download	28	9
All of the above	69	23
None of the above	64	21
Total	300	100

Table 6: Respondent's perceptual comparison of Nigerian online newspaper with their foreign counterparts like *New York Times* and *Le Monde*?

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No difference in their standards	159	53
Differences exist in their standards	78	26
Can't Say	63	21
Total	300	100

Table 7: Respondents' purchase of Hardcopy newspapers after exposure to the online Newspapers

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage (%)
I still buy	153	51
I do not buy again	147	49
	-	-
Total	300	100

Table 8: Respondents' perceived challenges on accessing Nigerian online newspapers

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Slow loading of pages	37	12
Difficulty in page follow-ups of continuing stories	23	8
Too many advertisements	29	10
All of the above	147	49
Can't say	64	21
Total	300	100

Table 9: Respondents' beliefs in Nigerian online newspaper stories

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	137	46
No	21	7
Sometimes	78	26
Can't say	64	21
Total	300	100

Table 10: Other difficulties in reading Nigerian Online newspapers

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Inability to detect false stories	34	11
Inability to detect the identity of journalists	31	10
Stories not written in basic journalistic style	36	12
Improper casting of story titles	25	8
Others	27	9
All of the Above	83	28
None in the above	64	21
Total	300	100

Discussion of Findings/Answers to Research Questions

Research Question 1: Are Nigerian online Newspapers of the same standard with their Western counterparts?

Responses in table 6 provided answers to the research question. It could be gleaned from the table that 58% majority respondents were clearly of the opinion that Nigerian online newspapers are of the same standard with their foreign counterparts. Evidence from the result in the table is simply a proof that, the standard of the Nigerian online Newspapers have so improved and can compare favourably well with their foreign counterparts. Again, this buttressed by the responses in table 9, where there is 46% respondents' belief in the credibility of the Nigerian news stories on the internet, which also attest to the fact that Nigerian online Newspapers have come of age and as such they can be well patronised worldwide.

Research Question 2: To what extent are Nigerians exposed to online Newspaper publications?

Responses in tables 1, 2, and 3 have thrown more light on this question. It is gathered that 62% of the respondents in table 1 have access to the internet, while 79% others in table 2 say, they read Nigerian online Newspapers. Again, 48% other respondents in table 3 say they usually read them on daily bases. These show that, through their surfing of the web, they usually come in contact with the Nigerian newspaper online, which they read. These findings reveal that people are now conversant with the Nigerian Newspapers online and not only in Nigeria but perhaps other parts of the world. More so, the level of accessibility and exposure to Nigerian online Newspapers by readers have the high tendency of their (Nigerian online Newspapers) being selectively perceived as having negative or positive contributions to journalism development in Nigeria and the world at large. Again, readers' perception of such publications is capable of igniting actions that are developmental or retrogressive in Nigerian society. This finding is also in consonance with the thesis of selective exposure, attention, retention and perception theories as enunciated by Folarin (2005, p 36)

Research Question 3: Does the online publication of Nigerian Newspapers have any effect on the actual sales of the hard copies?

Data on table 7 has given much credence to this research question. As shown on the table, 51% slight majority of the respondents still purchase hard copies of Nigerian newspapers after being exposed to the online ones. It can be inferred from this result that the online publications do not have significant effects on the actual sale of hard copies, as most respondents still buy the hard copies after reading the online ones, with their reasons being for references, believability, and other challenges being face in accessing online issues as reflected in tables 8 and 9 respectively. It can be observed that, the news information in the online and hard copy publications of Nigerian Newspapers all have effective patronage which signify that, their contents are still gratifying to readers which accords the tenets of the Uses and Gratification theory by Katz (1978).

Research Question 4: What is the level of effectiveness of the internet as a feedback medium to published stories in Nigerian Newspapers on the internet?

An open-ended question was posed in the questionnaire which was used in getting responses on how they see the Nigerian Newspapers online. Responses from the question show that, the average Nigerian is not conversant with the internet. It therefore means, most opinion seeking information placed online, including those in the Nigerian Online Newspapers are not being well responded to, by readers in Nigeria. Other responses show that, these people do not have the time to read the Newspapers on the internet. Since this is the case, one does not expect them to leave any feedback concerning the information in newspapers they read online. Other respondents were also of the opinion that, time and money is also another reason why internet has not been effective as a feedback medium. This is so because those who do not have access to the internet believe that spending one hundred and fifty naira per hour in a cybercafé is expensive. Before they could finish reading the papers online, their time expires, therefore leaving no room for feedback. From these findings, it is obvious that the internet has not been a very good feedback medium, perhaps in Nigeria. It could be observed in the result here that, the Nigerian Online Newspaper readers have not been exploring maximum utility the services offered by such online publications. This indicates that, although the online newspaper reader in Nigeria may feel gratified from the use they make of online newspapers, there are more gratifications to enjoy from the online channel and this requires more awareness creation to readers on the benefits for feedback avenues.

Research Question 5: What are the problems encountered by readers of Nigerian newspapers online?

Tables 8 and 10 provided the answer to the question, where respondents said that pages not loading on time and pages not being available are the most prominent problems they encountered while trying to access the Nigerian Newspaper on the internet. They also said that lack of update of news items is also there. This means that most of the Nigerian newspaper publishers do not update their news stories on the internet.

Other findings showed that:

1. There is no frequent (hourly) update of the news with necessary details.
2. Continuing pages are not accessible.
3. The Press Council is yet to ensure that all the Nigerian Newspapers are online.
4. Many Nigerians have not been made aware of the Nigerian online Newspapers by publishers through

- the publication of their websites on the pages of the hard copies.
5. The frequency in updates of the Nigerian Newspaper has not been well improved upon.
 6. Readers in Warri, Benin City, Port-Harcourt, Uyo, Yenagoa and Calabar see too many adverts on the internet as one of the problems that obstruct easy reading of News stories.
 7. The high rate of internet charges and low services experienced by internet subscribers was another drawback to Nigerian online Newspaper readership.

Conclusion

The internet is a relevant medium of communication in our modern society especially in the media environment vis-à-vis the newspaper owing to the various potentials which the internet displays. This development has also given Nigerian readers a medium of replying to publications in the Newspaper, as the various Newspapers online have established a feedback mechanism on the internet for readers to post their views or reactions. Even with this, many Nigerians still do not fancy the reading of Newspapers online because they believe that the internet is a place where any faceless individual can post whatever he likes for public consumption. Again, there is no maximum utility in the feedback avenues offered by such newspapers for online newspaper readers. However, the reverse is gradually becoming the case, as could be observed in this study, where there is improvement in reader's beliefs, patronage and the needs for feed backs. Again, there is no maximum utility in the feedback avenues offered by such newspapers for online newspaper readers.

Additionally, there is a gross and less awareness of Nigerian online newspapers among many Nigerians. For this reason, utility in readership of both Nigerian online Newspapers and foreign ones is far less than expected. From the above findings, it can still be upheld that audience perception and utilisation of the Nigerian online Newspaper is fast growing and taking a positive approach. It is no doubt hope that the Nigerian Media, especially newspaper organisations shall soon meet up the global trends and offer better quality information services for both Nigerian public and the world at large.

Recommendations

No doubt, a research involves an investigation geared towards increasing knowledge and providing ideas to solve problems. From this fact, coupled with an enthusiastic desire to ensure confirmatory evidence on this study, particularly in the aspect of achieving a greater feeling of certainty for likely purpose of making generalization in the future, it is therefore, deemed fit and necessary to make recommendations in this study as follows:

The lack of ICT knowledge should be tackled seriously for it affects the Newspaper publication on the internet. This should be done by the training of personnel in the newspaper houses. The quality of the Nigerian Newspaper online should be improved so that it can be compared favourably with the foreign Newspapers online. This can be done by the publishers updating the news daily and not repeating stale news. Advertising is a major source of finance for a most media organisations, no doubt. However, they ought not to be overflooded in newspaper pages to avoid experiences of monotony and clutter among readers. Nigerian media should exercise caution and as well develop more appealing and professional tactics in the placement and display of advertisements in online newspapers so that both messages can well be utilized by a reader devoid of one infringing on the other.

Again, the Nigerian media should help the government in creating awareness of the Nigerian Newspapers online so that the audience would develop more courage to read, since they are not as expensive as buying different copies of the hard copies. In the same vein, the media should help organize seminars on computer literacy, operation and skills acquisition, so that those who want to learn about the computer will do so.

Finally, there should be adequate power supply for the operation of the technologies used in the News media houses which the computer is one of them. Also, the internet (computer network) should be improved on, so that there will be easy access and timely loading of online newspaper, as there will be assurance and encouragement in readership of Online Newspapers, and as well encourage effective response to public issues through available online feedback mechanisms among Nigerian publics.

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